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### Proverbs, Morals and Spelling in the Bashkortostan Case

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Sjaak Kroon

## Proverbs, Morals and Spelling in the Bashkortostan Case

### 1. Introduction

My main ambition in the following has been to formulate as many questions as possible that could help me to analyse the selected transcripts as an outsider. Some of the questions are rather straightforward and simple to answer. Others are going deeper and call for thorough analysis and discussion, probably not only from an outsider's Dutch perspective but also from an insider's Russian perspective. In asking these questions I follow the methodological ambition formulated in the introduction to this part of the book. In doing so, I am aware of course of the Dutch proverb "One fool can ask more questions than a thousand wise man can answer". If the questions just lead to further discussion and clarification of the incidents, my goal is fulfilled.

Apart from asking questions, I also give some comments. In these comments some directions for possible analysis and interpretation can be found. In this respect, I mainly focus on the issue of nation building and the role of language therein. Every section opens with the English version of the transcript and the accompanying background information

### 2. "The basis of morals begins in a mother tongue"

#### 2.1. Text and background information

##### **Introduction**

*Date: March 2001*

*School: Ufa Bashkir School 20*

*Teacher: a woman, service record of 25 years*

*Subject: a Bashkir language lesson, dealing with Bashkir proverbs and sayings*

*Objective: To reveal national peculiarities of some proverbs out of the originality in the historical development of each nation. Various languages can express one and the same notion using different forms of meaning. For example, an idea of unity has the following expression in the languages: in Arab – "One hair is not a beard"; in Finnish – "One log is not enough to build a ship"; in German – "One flower is not a wreath"; in Bashkir – "One grain is not enough to cook porridge"; and others.*

*At the mother tongue lesson children are taught to feel the beauty of their mother tongue, of their national culture and traditions.*

*T: Teacher*

*P: Pupil*

##### **Transcript**

*(Several Bashkir proverbs are written on the blackboard)*

*T: What language are these proverbs taken from?*

*P: From the Bashkir language.*

*T: Why do you think so?*

*P: There are some Bashkir words, e.g. 'mulla' (priest).*

*T: What else characteristic of the Bashkir people is there in these proverbs?*

*P: Deep respect for labour and its importance.*

*T: Do you know any other Bashkir proverbs about Mother, parents, old people?*

P: "Mother cares for children, children care for games."  
T: What Russian proverb means the same?  
P: "Mother's heart is in children, children's heart is in games".  
T: Do you know any Bashkir proverbs about the Bashkir people hospitality?  
P: "A friendly face, nice tea".  
T: Yes, you're right. Hospitality among the Bashkir people means not only to treat a guest to something tasty, but to show their respect to a person.  
One more Bashkir proverb on the same theme: "If you have a big soul, one match will be enough for all the people"  
Generally speaking, mother tongue proverbs are the basis of morals for each nation.

## 2.2. Inventory of questions

- 1 It is a lesson of the Bashkir language. What is the language of instruction, Bashkir or Russian. If it is Bashkir, is there any code-switching to Russian (or vice versa)?
- 2 What about the Bashkir proficiency of the teacher and the pupils? Is Bashkir really their mother tongue? What is the pupils' age?
- 3 What is the teacher's professional background; is she trained to be a Bashkir language teacher (if so: in what institution); or is she originally trained for another subject?
- 4 Bashkir proverbs and saying are the topic of the lesson. Is this a regular topic in the Bashkir language lessons? How does it fit in the Bashkir language curriculum? Are proverbs and sayings also dealt with in Russian language lessons or is it typical for Bashkir lessons.
- 5 Regarding the object and aim of the lesson as indicated. There are two aims: (1) a cognitive linguistic-historical-comparative aim (to reveal national peculiarities of proverbs out of the originality of the historical development of each nation; various languages can express the same notion using different forms of meaning), and (2) an attitudinal aim: to feel the beauty of the mother tongue, the national culture and traditions. How are the two related? Are they both in the syllabus and/or the curriculum? Are comparable aims to be found in other lessons?
- 6 Writing on the blackboard: Are the proverbs written in Bashkir? How many and which proverbs?
- 7 Why does the teacher ask, in which language the proverbs are written? For Bashkir speaking children this would be a very strange question, because the answer would be all too obvious. See question 2.
- 8 After the right answer of a pupil the teacher asks 'why do you think so'. Also this is a strange question for pupils who know Bashkir.
- 9 A pupil's answer that there are some Bashkir words (e.g. 'mulla') is puzzling. If the proverbs are in Bashkir, all the words will be in Bashkir and not only some words.
- 10 The next question is about other characteristics of the Bashkir people. This implies that the Bashkir language is considered to be characteristic. Is there really no more talk about language aspects of the proverbs in class?
- 11 The pupil's answer (respect for labour and its importance) can only be judged if we know the proverbs on the blackboard. The answer (is there really only one answer by one pupil? How many pupils are participating anyway; please indicate their names) is apparently right, since the teacher does not ask for clarification or justification.
- 12 The next question about 'other Bashkir proverbs about mothers, parents, old people' suggests that there has been a discussion on these persons, or that they are in the proverbs on the blackboard. See question 6.

- 13 The answer 'mother cares for children, children care for games' does not lead to explaining the proverb's meaning, nor to a discussion about what is typically Bashkir about it. And apparently it is universal, since there is also a Russian version that the children know. There is no linguistic-historical-comparative aim.
- 14 According to the teacher's next question 'hospitality' is a Bashkir characteristic. Is the pupil's answer 'a friendly face, nice tea' given in Bashkir? Here for the first time a proverb's meaning is explained.
- 15 The teacher gives another example of a Bashkir proverb but she does not explain it.
- 16 The conclusion by the teacher 'mother tongue proverbs are the basis of morals for each nation' is more or less out of the blue. The lesson, i.e. the contributions by the children nor the teacher really lead to this conclusion.

### 2.3. Comments

Let me start with a technical comment. The transcript seems to be highly edited, i.e. not a literal transcript of a real lesson, but some fragments and/or excerpts of a lesson put together in this text, thereby also leaving out some fragments. If this would be the case, this should be indicated in the transcript's introduction. By editing the transcript in this way, and by giving it its title, it is suggested that the transcript is meant to be an example of good practice, i.e. showing how Bashkir proverbs can be used to teach Bashkir morals. If this is the case, it should be indicated.

In language teaching all over the world (as far as I know it) proverbs seem to play a certain role in mother tongue teaching. There can be various reasons for that fact: (1) improving the pupils' language proficiency at a rhetorical level: knowing when to use what proverb in which situation; (2) improving the pupils' language knowledge: being able to analyse proverbs in their linguistic characteristics, such as old words and constructions, briefness, metaphorical strength, semantic aspects etc.; (3) seeing proverbs as an expression of a shared history or culture, i.e. expressing the forefathers' and foremothers' shared experiences with the world in general and daily life in particular: knowledge of the world; (4) learning lessons about how to behave: morals. There may be more. The reason why and how exactly in this lesson proverbs are dealt with deserves more clarification. The conclusion of the lesson points into the direction of 'morals' but the stated objectives point in other directions as well.

The connection between morals teaching and the other stated aims of the lessons on the one hand and the aims of Bashkir language teaching on the other hand needs clarification. Are proverbs used to teach language (instrumental) or are there other aims as well. Reading the transcript, one is left with the impression that its aim is primarily to show that proverbs can be used in Bashkir language teaching to form self-conscious Bashkir citizens who know the morals of their ancestors. These moral then are supposed to be still valid in modern times. This calls for a discussion about proverbs (as an expression of the past) and modernity in which the pupils live.

In the title of the transcript the reference to proverbs is missing. It is more general: 'the basis of morals begins in a mother tongue'. What is 'the basis of morals'? What does the word 'begins' actually mean? What about the idea that language as such is neutral and just instrumental? If nations want to stress their nationhood, they generally speaking use 'the one people, one home land, one language' formula. For Bashkortostan this is a complex position since there are living various nations in the same land: the name giving dominant ethnos (the Bashkir), at least one other indigenous ethnos (the Tatar) and a number of non-indigenous ethnos. Among the latter the Russians, who are, sociologically speaking, probably still a dominant group. What about building a Bashkir nation accommodating all these different ethnos?

### 3. "I won't go to school, they cut there at exams"

#### 3.1. Text and background information

##### **Introduction**

*Date: February 2001*

*School: School 35 in Ufa. The tenth form. The students study the programme of secondary schools; the children – the Bashkirs; besides Russian and foreign language, they study Bashkir*

*Class: 24 pupils, among them 9 Tatars, 5 Bashkirs, 10 Russians*

*Subject: a Russian language lesson, dealing with phraseological units*

*Objective: to teach pupils to love the Russian language and to understand its peculiarities in meaning*

*Teacher: T*

*Pupil: P*

##### **Transcript**

*T: Some words as units can sometimes be used to express an idea figuratively or metaphorically. Such phrases or word-combinations become very popular among people and in some cases, among children. But their figurative meaning can lead to a mistake in understanding. (To show this, the children act out a situation with a headline "I won't go to school as they 'cut' there at the exams".)*

*It's an autumn morning. The sun is shining brightly. First-year pupils go to school. Somebody is crying:*

*Mum, I won't go to school, I'm scared!*

*There's nothing to be afraid of, daughter. Your father, mother and brother went to school. You must study. I do fear. Kate told how nice it is at school! She knows. They scold and put bad marks. No, I won't go, and they cut at the exams there.*

*She goes on crying. A senior pupil comes up and says:*

*Don't cry, kiddy. Come with me to nine-year schoolgirls, they will tell you about school and teachers.*

*(The boy asks his classmates to read letters to their first primary school teacher.*

*They read out the letters and hand them in to the teacher. They wish her health, in every success and wealth.)*

*Well, what do you think, you cry-baby?*

*OK, I'll go to school. I'll be a good pupil!*

*T: What can you say about this situation?*

*P: The little girl understands the phrase 'to cut at the exams' in the direct meaning as 'to cut by a knife'.*

*T: And how do you understand it?*

*P: It means that teachers put bad marks to pupils.*

##### **Commentary**

*This key case is a very good part of the lesson in the way of explaining phraseological units and their meaning.*

### 3.2. Inventory of questions

- 1 It is Russian language lesson in an ethnically and linguistically mixed class. Are there any signs of pupils having problems with Russian since they are Bashkir or Tatar speakers? What is the pupils' age? What about the pupils' proficiency in Russian?
- 2 Is the teacher trained as a Russian language teacher? At what institution?
- 3 The subject is 'phraseological units'. What does this exactly mean? Metaphorical use of language, as indicated in the transcript?
- 4 Is the subject 'phraseological units' explicitly related to the lesson's double objective 'to teach pupils to love Russian and to understand its peculiarities in meaning' or is the stress on the 'understanding' part? Is it a language lesson or a language attitudes lesson?
- 5 Is the opening sequence of the teacher a literal transcript of what he/she says. It seems to be very theoretical in its wording.
- 6 It is not clear how the transcript is organised. Teacher and pupils should be clearly indicated. The sentence in brackets '(To show this, the children act out a situation with a headline "I won't go to school as they 'cut' there at the exams")' introduces a part in the transcript that is more or less an account of what goes on in the classroom (acting out the situation). It is difficult to distinguish who is talking when. Also the role of the teacher is not really visible. How much time does the acting out take? Is it strongly guided by the teacher or are the pupils engaged in free play. How and when did they prepare for the acting out.
- 7 The lesson ends with the explanation of the teacher by asking a question to a pupil that leads to the explanation. It just involves the meaning of one phraseological unit. Are there more examples of phraseological units and their literal/metaphorical meaning dealt with in this lesson?
- 8 How does this lesson fit in the Russian curriculum? How much time is devoted to it?
- 9 What about the 'teaching to love Russian' part of the lesson's objective? How is this materialised. I cannot see it in the transcript. Is it part of the curriculum?

### 3.3. Comments

My main technical comment here has to do with the indistinctness of the transcript. I cannot really see how the pupils and the teacher interact. Transcripts should meet formal rules in order to make them analysable by researchers from abroad. Now it is unclear what is transcript and what is already interpretation by arrangement and editing.

Another comment has to do with the lesson's twofold objective. If the lesson has been selected, as is suggested in the commentary, as an example of good practice (as possibly also the other transcripts) I am unable to follow this choice: the explanation of meaning is rather superficial (at least as far as shown by the transcript) and teaching to love Russian is missing completely.

Interesting from a multilingual perspective would be a discussion about the question if the problem in understanding the verb 'cut' here is related to the children's language background. Or is it a general language-learning problem?

#### 4. "In the country of capital letters" (A lesson on the subject of Spelling)

##### 4.1. Text and background information

###### **Introduction**

*School: School Nr. 2, the village of Ascarovo, Abzelilovsky Region, the farthest region of Bashkortostan. There are 597 pupils in school, among them 10 Russians. They study the programme for national schools. The mother tongue is studied as a subject.*

*The teacher: Z. Zchekleeva, 15 years of record of work. She teaches only the Russian language at primary school. At this school unlike the others the Russian language is taught by one teacher. Gradually other subjects are taught by other teachers. Z. Zchekleeva, a Bashkir, is married to a Russian, can speak Russian very well.*

*In the course of active practice work on the programme the third-year pupils study the rules of writing place and proper names in capitals. At the lesson the teacher used wall posters, cards and the map of Bashkortostan.*

*Subject: Writing in capital letters*

*T: Teacher*

*C: Children*

###### **Transcript**

###### **I An arrangement**

*T: Today we are going to travel to the Country of capital letters. Children, remember when you first learned about the capital letter. (In the first form, some elementary knowledge.)*

*C: A sentence begins with a capital letter.*

*T: Very good of you! And now listen to a poem and think over its main idea.*

*The Country of Capital letters  
A letter doesn't want to grow.  
A letter is given an important duty.  
A usual letter has suddenly grown  
Above all the other letters – friends.  
A letter doesn't want to grow,  
A letter is given an important duty.  
It stands at the beginning of the line  
In order that everybody can see the beginning.  
Names are written in capitals  
To be seen more visibly,  
To sound loudly and proudly.  
A capital letter is not a trifle  
A capital letter has a respectable symbol!*

*T: What are the main lines?*

*C: A letter doesn't want to grow.*

*A letter is given an important duty.*

*T: Very nice of you! Put down these lines, they will be a motto of our lesson.*

*So, what should we write in capitals?*

*(A poster)*

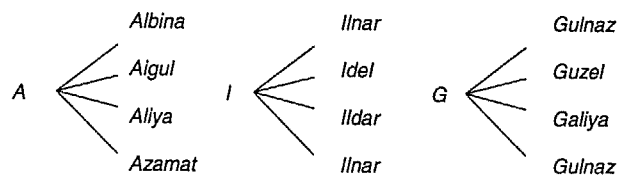
**A CAPITAL LETTER**

T: Read out the motto once again.

## II Speech practice

A capital letter in first and last names and in proper nouns.

T: On the Earth every man has a name. To make our travel interesting, let's get acquainted. Read the words:



T.: What is this?

C.: The names of our classmates.

T.: What is the important duty of capital letter?

C.: Names should be written in capital.

(A poster)

Names Surnames Father's names
-------------------------------------

T.: What interesting have you noticed about the names?

C.: The names are repeated.

T.: Those who have the same names are called namesakes. Put down the names of namesakes. How do we tell one from another?

C.: They have different surnames, father's names. (The children write their names in their exercise books.)

T.: A cat is going to travel with us. Listen to a poem and guess its name:

There lived a Grandma and a Grandpa  
With a little granddaughter,  
And their red cat.  
They called Zshuchka,  
And they had a dog named Murka.

T.: Why are you smiling?

C.: The poet mixed up the names of the dog and the cat.

T.: What is our cat's name?

C.: Murka.

T.: Have you got pets? Put down their names. What is the duty of a capital letter?

C.: Names of animals should be written in capitals.

(A poster)

Animals' names
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## III Vocabulary work

Zagir. Pencil-box. Gumirov. Pupil. Dog. Ishkulovo. Ufa.

T: Read out the words, which should be written in capitals. What do the last two words mean?

C: They are place names, which should always be written in capitals.



#### **IV Capital letters with place names**

*T: We're going to travel in the world of the science of place names.  
(A poster)*

##### **Place names**

*T: We'll travel through villages, towns, rivers, lakes and mountains. Where can we see the place names?*

*C: On the map.*

*(There is the map of Bashkortostan)*

*T: What is the name of our Republic?  
(A card)*

##### **Bashkortostan**

*T: How do we write the word Bashkortostan?*

*C: In a capital letter.*

*T: What is the capital of Bashkortostan?*

*C: Ufa  
(A card)*

##### **Ufa**

*T: What is the name of the region we live in?  
(A card)*

##### **Askarovo**

*T: We go on travelling. Name your native village, mountains, lakes, rivers.*

*(At the end of the lesson the children answer the questions:*

- What is the name of our country?*
- What is its capital?*
- What towns in Russia do you know? )*

#### **4.2. Inventory of questions**

- 1 The information given on the school and the pupils is a little bit puzzling. The majority are non-Russian. Are they Bashkir and Tatar or are there also other groups? The pupils study the programme for national schools. What does this exactly mean in term of the curriculum and the language of instruction? What is the language of instruction, Bashkir or Russian? The mother tongue is studied as a subject. Does this refer to Bashkir only (or also to other mother tongues)? What about the teaching of Russian? What does it mean that it is only taught by one teacher? What does the sentence 'Gradually other subjects are taught by other teachers' mean? Do they teach in Russian? What subjects are meant? What is special as regards this arrangement compared to other schools in Bashkortostan? What is the relevance of the remark that the teacher can speak Russian very well? Is this normally not the case?
- 2 Is the spelling lesson about capitals in Russian or in Bashkir?

- 3 What is the place of spelling instruction in the Bashkir and/or Russian language curriculum?
- 4 Is the way in which the teaching goes on (with visual aids) a normal procedure in language teaching?
- 5 Why is the sentence '(In the first form, some elementary knowledge)' in brackets? Was it not said by the teacher? Is it a comment from the transcriber or interpreter?
- 6 Does the teacher read the poem aloud? Do the pupils have it on paper?
- 7 What is the function of the first poster? Why is it presented after the teacher's question 'So, what should we write in capitals?'. What is the answer to this question anyway? And who gives it? Where are the pupils in the transcript 'reading out the motto once again'?
- 8 After the section 'Arrangement' comes a section 'Speech practice'. Where does this division come from? How much time is there in the transcript between these different parts? Are they in the same lesson?
- 9 Why is this part called 'speech practice'?
- 10 Where are the names with A, I and G written? Blackboard?
- 11 Where is the poem on animal names printed?
- 12 Why can a dog not be called Murka? Are there typical cat/dog names?
- 13 Why is the next section called 'Vocabulary work'? It is still about spelling of words with capital letters.
- 14 Is the use of names of national places, rivers, mountains etc. in Bashkortostan meant to teach the pupils to love their fatherland or is it just spelling?
- 15 Why is there a memory/knowledge question in the end that has nothing to do with spelling?

#### 4.3. Comments

The lesson gives an illustration of how spelling of capital letters is taught. It uses all kinds of aids, such as poem, posters, graphs, and riddles. Is this a normal way of dealing with spelling? Is it as such in the curriculum and the syllabus or is it the teacher's own initiative and work?

Are such skills as capitalisation been taught also in Tatar or Bashkir lessons? If so, in what ways are there skills transferred between different language classes.

Competence in Russian seems to be highly valued by Bashkir speakers themselves. If someone like the teacher in this transcript has good command of Russian, it is highly praised. But we are not presented with any information or praise about the good command of a Bashkir or Tatar language teacher. The project is on multilingual and multicultural classrooms but we don't seem to get a glimpse of expected complicated interactions in such classrooms.

It would have been interesting if the participant observer, after the observed lessons, could have asked a number of questions or clarifications to the teacher. At least the teacher could have presented her/his evaluation of the class-hour reflecting on the interaction and possible miscommunication resulting from linguistic factors. This applies to the other transcripts as well.

If you think about language teaching and nationhood, there is a possibly interesting relationship where spelling of capitals is related to 'national' names. This is, however, not further developed. It is remarkable that the pupils are asked to reproduce the name of the country, the capital and Russian towns. Is there an aspect of geography involved?